8: Haile N-5 (1950) 1951 OC6 Iban OC6

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700

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[Title Page]

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# A Dayak Game

*by*

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524 The Sea Dayaks (here called Balaus) of the Silantek area, near Pantu in the 2nd Division of Sarawak, play an interesting game known as "*main machan*". I have seen this game being played only at Rumah Silantek, but it is known at several other [887] houses in the area. The Dayaks told me that it is an "old men's game", and I gather that it is not much played these days, although it seemed in July 1950 to be enjoying a temporary vogue at Silantek—I imagine somewhat to the detriment of the paddy farms.

The game is played on a board, which at Silantek is merely roughly scratched on the floor planks, and which consist of intersecting lines—squares and diagonals—as shown in the idealized figures i and ii. There are two players, one of whom takes the "*endo*" (women) and the other the "*anak*" (children), the *endo* consist of two chips of wood, and the *anak* of twenty-eight smaller pieces, which at Silantek were made of chopped up grass stems. For convenience, the two players will be referred to as player "E", and player "A", respectively.

The game commences by A placing nine of the *anak* pieces on the nine intersection points in the middle of the board (as shown in figure i). E then removes any three of these *anak*, and places his two *endo* on any vacant intersection points. When it is his turn to move, E can move either one of his pieces to any adjacent unoccupied intersection point along a line, or can jump over, and take any adjacent odd number of *anak*, in a straight line—see figure ii and explanatory notes. This E will normally place the two *endo* so that, wherever A puts his next *anak*, E can jump over and take a further three *anak*.

The game proceeds with each player moving alternately, E moving or taking with one on other of his two *endo*, and A placing his remaining *anak* on vacant intersection points one at a time. A's purpose is to hem in the two *endo* so they cannot move or take, E tries to avoid this, and at the same time to take as many *anak* as he can. When all the twenty-eight *anak* have

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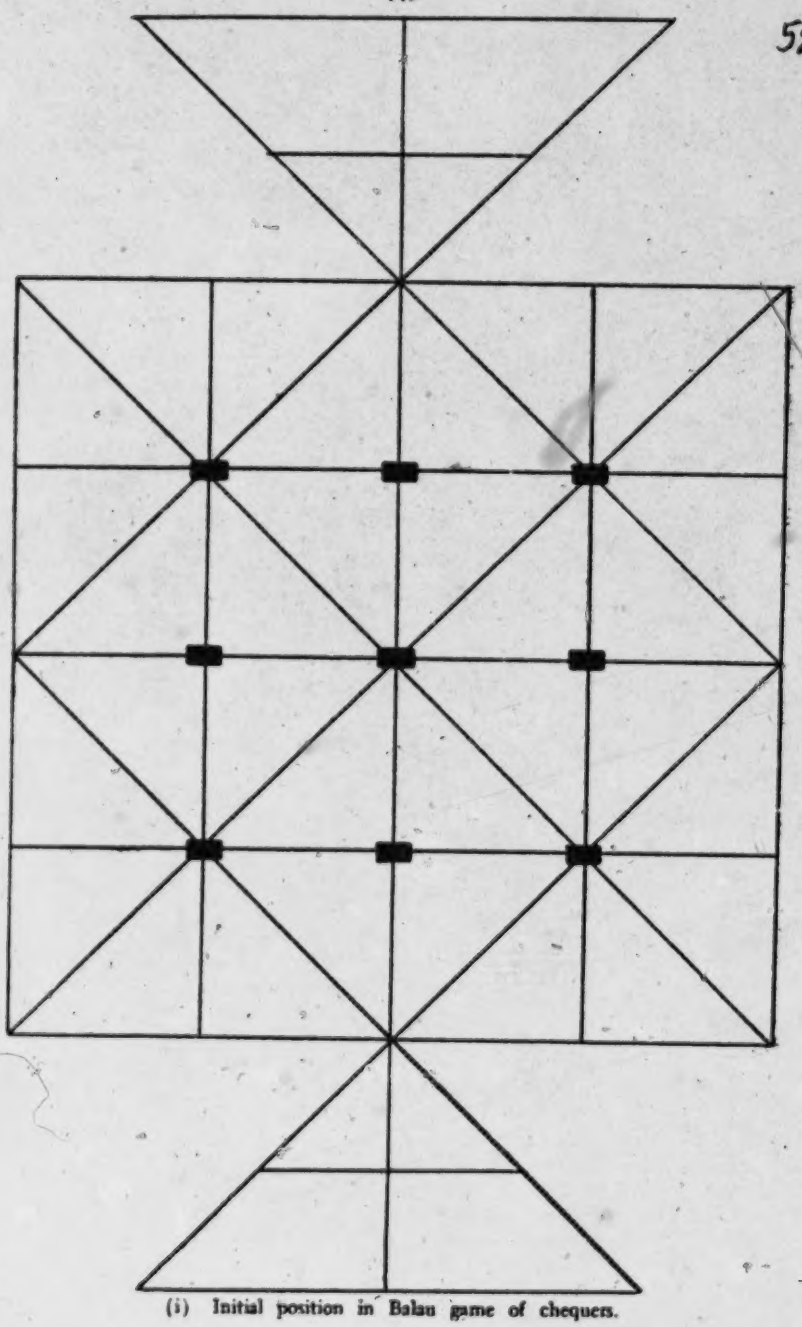
[p.442]

8: Haile N-5 (1950) 1951 OC6 Iban OC6



524



(i) Initial position in Balau game of chequers.

8: Haile N-5 (1950) 1951 OC6 Iban OC6



524 been placed, they can move in the same way as the endo, and the game is carried on until A has either hemmed in both endo so they cannot move or take (in which case A wins), or lost so many anak that it is obvious he cannot achieve this (in which case E wins).

[184] There is another variety of the game, played in the same way but with only one endo and twenty-five anak, but this is said to be inferior.

524 576 It will be seen from the above description that the game involves considerable skill. In the first game I played I was well beaten, and I managed to win the second only with the help of much whispered advice from the local experts. As far as proprieties are concerned, it is considered inappropriate for spectators to offer verbal advice, but to warn of a dangerous move by a sharp intake of breath is apparently permissible. The tyro is particularly warned to be on his guard against those unscrupulous players who split one of their anak to make an extra piece, or who will move one of their pieces along a crack in the floorboards which is not a true line in order to get out of an embrassing situation.

524 177 The origin of the game is not clear. The Dayaks were emphatic that it was an Iban (Sea Dayak) game, and whilst some Kuching Malays are familiar with the game, they use the Iban terminology (i.e. "endo"), and recognise that it is a Dayak game. Although a cursory examination of ethnological literature produced no reference to the game in this form, the fact that it has spread to Kuching Malays suggests that the game may have been more popular in the past. The word "machan" is Javanese for tiger, and so the game possibly came from there.

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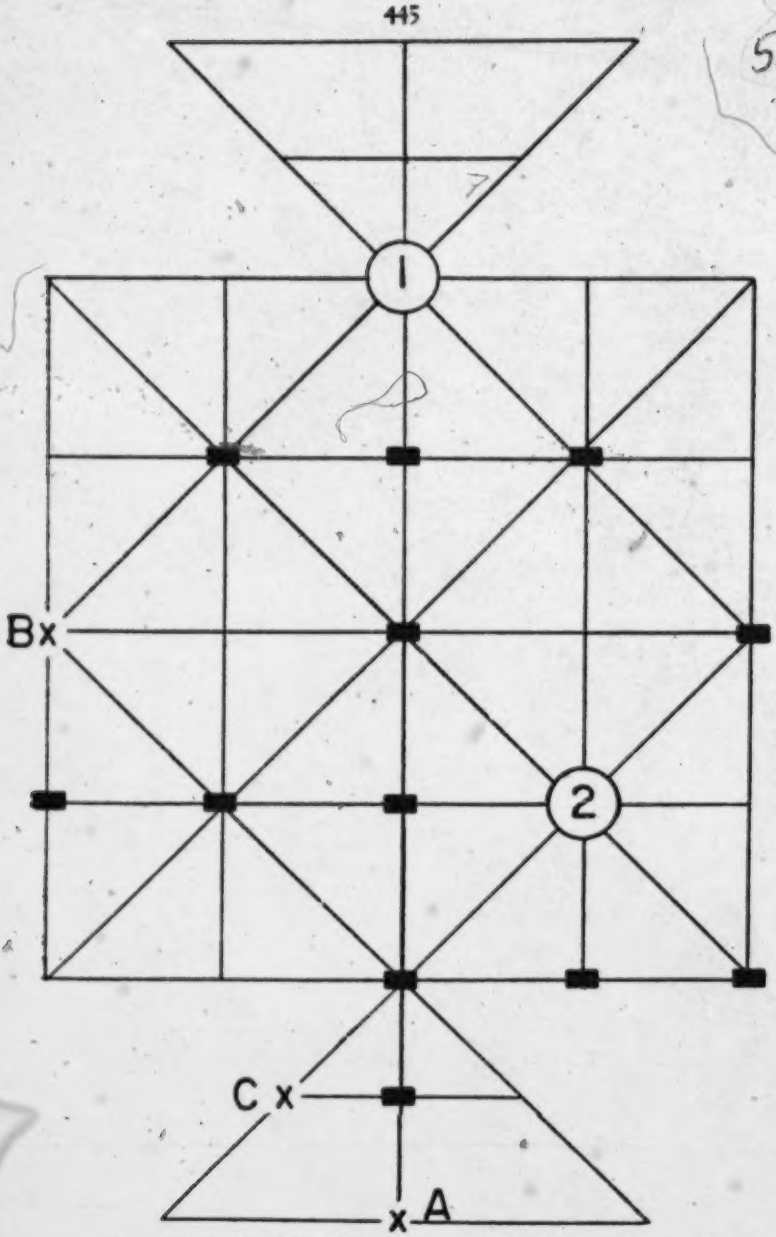
[EDITORIAL NOTE:

177 It is likely this game came to S. E. Asia from India, and the Celebes Bugis, great voyagers helped spread it. In transit it has varied widely. This interesting form is apparently now recorded from Borneo for the first time. For a survey of Celebes varieties see Walter Kaudern's "Games and Dances in Celebes", Gotenborg. 1929. pp. 311-313.]

524




(ii) Position in Balau chequers' game as play advances (see text).